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AUTHOR Smith, Margaret A.; Baker, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

Research has shown a relation between a student's academic major decision status and the quality of his/her adjustment to college. Three studies were conducted to examine this issue in college freshmen. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was used to measure academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, institutional attachment, and a full-scale score. In study 1, 23 freshmen with majors and 13 without majors completed the SACQ during their second semester. Data analysis revealed that the mean scores of students with majors were higher than the mean scores of nonmajors on all five indices and the differences were statistically significant for academic adjustment, institutional attachment, and full-scale scores. In study 2, 37 freshmen with no majors and 38 with majors completed the SACQ during their first semester. T-tests revealed that the mean score of students with majors was significantly higher than that of nonmajors on the academic adjustment subscale only. In study 3, the SACQ was completed by 103 freeshmen in their second semester; the subjects in study 3 included those participating in study 2. The mean scores of students with majors were significantly higher than those of nonmajors for all indices except social adjustment. These findings support the hypothesis of a positive relation between freshmen academic major decision status and adjustment to college, with the relation appearing to emerge more clearly in the second semester than in the first and the effect appearing to be most pronounced with respect to academic achievement. (NB)

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FRESHMAN DECIDEDNESS REGARDING ACADEMIC MAJOR AND ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE

Margaret A. Smith and Robert W. Baker

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Freshman Decidedness Regarding Academic Major and Adjustment to College

Margaret A. Smith and Robert W. Baker
Clark University

My talk today will briefly describe a series of three studies investigating the relation between the academic major decision status of freshmen and various aspects of adjustment to college. Our expectation was that decidedness about major would be associated with better adjustment to college, on the assumption that having a sense of direction and purpose as one begins a venture requiring considerable time, effort and expense will have beneficial consequences for the way one feels about oneself in, and adapts to, that undertaking.

Other investigators have found relation between major decision status and quality of adjustment to college. It is reported in the literature that decided or relatively more certain students perform better academically than undecided or less certain ones, are less anxious, may make better social adjustment, and are less likely to drop out of college. Also, students who are satisfied with their major are less anxious than those who are not satisfied, and they are more satisfied with college in general.

The present studies employed the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire as the source of dependent variables (Baker & Siryk, 1986, in press). Because the SACQ yields measures of different aspects of adjustment to college, it allows for a more systematic and comprehensive consideration of the nature of the relation between major decision status and that adjustment than has been attempted before. Furthermore, because the present investigation is actually a series of studies carried out over three successive semesters, it permits some greater explication of the relation between major decision status and adjustment to college than what is possible in isolated, one-time studies.

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The first study was done in a second semester of an academic year. A junior psychology major at the time, I approached freshmen individually and asked if they would be willing to volunteeer for a study I was doing for a research course. Those who agreed were first administered the SACQ, followed by a questionnaire concerning major status. On the latter questionnaire, the student was asked to indicate whether he or she had a major. Those answering affirmatively were asked to name the major and rate on a 9-point scale their degree of certainty that it would be their ultimate major.

Two groups of students representing a clear difference in decidedness of major were identified -- 13 with no major and 23

who selected any of the three points at the "very certain" end of the rating scale. T-tests were performed to examine differences between means for the two groups on each of the adjustment indices, i.e., the four subscale scores and the full-scale score. The differences between means on all five indices were in the expected direction -- students with majors having the higher scores -- and were statistically significant for the Academic Adjustment and Institutional Attachment subscales and for the full-scale.

Though these results were favorable to our hypothesis, they could be regarded as only suggestive because of the design limitations related to the fact that the study was carried out hurriedly in the latter few weeks of a semester. It was decided to replicate the study the following semester with a new freshman class and with some improvements in design.

In the middle of the fall semester of the ensuing academic year, a questionnaire soliciting information regarding major status was sent through campus mail to the 561 freshmen who had entered Clark University in September. The following week the SACQ was sent to the 164 students who had completed and returned the major status questionnaire. Completed SACQ forms were received for 105 students. Two groups of students representing a clear difference in decidedness were constructed in the same manner as in the first study. This time there were 37 students without majors and 38 with majors for which they reported a high degree of certainty. T-tests revealed a significant difference in means in the expected direction for these two groups on the academic adjustment subscale but not on any of the other indices.

The relation between academic major decision status and adjustment to college in this second study thus seemed considerably weaker than in the first study. Analyzing the two studies for differences in design that could account for the differences in findings, the most plausible reason to us seemed to be the point in the freshman experience at which the two studies were done.

The more recent study was carried out with freshmen in their first semester of college, while the earlier one was done with freshmen in their second semester. Is it possible, we wondered, that the first semester freshmen are not yet far enough into the college experience for choice of major to be a very important issue? Maybe students at that early time of the college career are still testing out a tentative choice or considering alternatives, without much internal or external pressure to make a decision. The college itself, for example, does not broach the issue of major declaration until the first semester of the sophomore year. It may be that only as the academic year wears on would academic major status become sufficiently important as to have consequences for adjustment to college. To test this possibility, we decided to repeat the study in the second semester.

In the middle of the second semester, all freshmen were again sent letters requesting their participation in a continuation of the research for which they had been solicited in the first semester. The mailing contained a copy of the same questionnaire concerning academic major status that was used in the first semester study. This time that questionnaire was completed and returned by 150 students.

The following week SACQ forms were distributed to those 150 students, and this time were completed and returned by 103 students. Again two groups of students representing clear difference in decidedness of major were identified, in the same manner as before, and t-tests performed to examine the differences between the two groups on the adjustment indices.

Now the differences between means were significant, and in the expected direction, for all indices except social adjustment. The findings of the pilot study were thus in effect replicated, with an additional significant finding for the Personal-Emotional subscale.

In overview, this series of studies supports the hypothesis of a positive relation between freshman decision status regarding academic major and adjustment to college, but the relation seems to emerge more clearly in the second semester than in the first. The tenability of the explanation offered for this -- i.e., that decision status regarding academic major may be less salient and pressing a factor in the life of the student at the beginning of the college experience than as that experience progresses -- could be explored by repeating the study with sophomores, or even early juniors. If the explanation is valid, then the relation should emerge even more clearly at those later stages of the college career than in the latter part of the freshman year.

The results of the present investigation indicate furthermore that the effect appears to be most pronounced with respect to academic adjustment, occurring in all three studies. It is next most pronounced on goal commitment/institutional attachment, occurring in both studies carried out in spring semesters. The effect is seen in the area of personal-emotional adjustment only in the second spring semester study, and in social adjustment not at all.

It makes sense that decision status regarding academic major would have clearest consequences for academic adjustment and goal commitment/institutional attachment, for those are the areas for which degree of articulation of one's educational plans would have most immediate relevance. If one has no major, it is likely that there will be an associated deficiency in sense of educational purpose, in capacity for applying oneself to demands deriving from the academic work that is the most central aspect of the college experience, in achieving success in those efforts, and in experiencing satisfaction with the academic setting. These

four aspects of academic functioning are, indeed, the four categories into which the 24 items of the Academic Adjustment subscale have been sorted in earlier studies that used the SACQ.

Similarly, if one has no major, it is likely that there will be a deficiency in sense of commitment to academic goals or to the institution that embodies those purposes, i.e., the aspects of adjustment to college that the Goal Commitment/Institutional Attachment subscale is designed to measure.

If, as reasoned earlier, the absence of major becomes a more salient factor as the college experience continues, then possibly the personal-emotional and social areas of adjustment to college could be more affected in subsequent semesters than they were in the studies reported here. That is, as pressures associated with lack of major grow, they may have more permeating effects for adjustment to college.

Baker, R. W. & Siryk, B. (1986, in press). The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire: Manual. Western Psychological Services.